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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed as a tool to help members of the education sector involve community members in discussions about their local schools and learn how to become involved in the process of improving education in their community. The first half of the guide presents basic material for conducting a four- to seven-session discussion program based on the study circle model. Materials dealing with the following discussion topics are included: how schools affect communities and community members' lives; what community members want graduates to know and be able to do; how schools can meet every students' needs, make schools safer, deal with racial and ethnic diversity, and provide high quality education with limited resources; and what community members can do to improve education. The next section presents basic "how-to" materials on the following aspects of the study circle process: the structure, goals, and operation of study circles; organizing and leading study circles on education; and suggestions for participants. Concluding the guide is a listing of 13 organizations, 39 publications, and 7 videos dealing with community involvement in improving education, as well as the sources of the 5 "schools that work" stories included in the preceding section. (MN)

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ED 380 578

Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?

A Guide for Involving Community Members in Public Dialogue and Problem-Solving

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You are welcome to photocopy this publication as needed, or you can order additional copies of ***Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?*** from SCRC for $5.00 each, plus $2.00 per order for shipping and handling; discounts are available for large orders. Also available is ***The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide: Education in Our Communities***. The Busy Citizen's booklet, designed as a participant handout for discussion programs based on this guide, consists mainly of the Discussion Materials section of this booklet. Copies of the brief version, in a 5½ x 8½ format, are available for $1.00 each, plus $2.00 per order for shipping and handling; discounts are available for large orders.

Foreword

Why talk about our schools?

The purpose of this guide is to involve community members in discussions about their schools and how they can support them. It provides a way for everyone to talk about what they want from education and how they can play a part in making education in their community all that it can be.

We often hear about the weaknesses of our nation's schools. We don't hear much about effective schools or about the communities that sustain them. *Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?* provides opportunities for people to consider schools that work, and to talk about what will work in their own community. It also provides a way to build on a community's unique assets: the many dedicated professionals who work in the schools; businesspeople, public officials, and workers in social service agencies and other community organizations; committed and concerned parents and students; and other concerned citizens.

Since most formal education takes place in public schools, much of this guide focuses on what happens there. Yet, a consistent theme is that schools and their communities cannot be considered separately. While there is no easy answer to meeting the challenge of education, it is clear that any lasting answer will require the involvement of many people from throughout the community.

Communities that attempt to involve citizens in education often face obstacles. Many people who want to be involved don't know where to begin. Others feel too overwhelmed or unprepared. Some feel disconnected because they don't have children in the schools. Still others are put off by the rancorous debate that often surrounds school issues.

The discussion process described in this guide is a practical way to overcome these obstacles. Study circles - small-group, democratic, peer-led discussions - provide a simple way to involve community members in genuine, productive dialogue. In this kind of discussion, people have a chance to consider all points of view. There is no pressure to come to consensus, to accept a particular view, or to take a specific course of action. Coming together in this respectful and democratic way can be an important first step to working together to improve education in the community.

When students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other community members talk and listen to each other, they will gain a deeper understanding of what they want from their schools. Through the discussions, they will become better prepared to take individual or collective action. They will also be building the bonds of community that are essential to effective schools.

Any community organization or coalition can sponsor study circles on education. Parent-teacher organizations, school boards, school councils, teachers' unions, student groups, chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, government agencies, religious organizations, urban leagues, volunteer centers, Head Start programs, community colleges, universities - all can provide opportunities for community members to talk about education.

Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge? is a flexible tool for creating open, democratic dialogue. It lays out basic material for a four- to seven-session discussion program, and provides "how-to" information for discussion organizers, leaders, and participants. The

five "Schools that work" stories will help study circle participants broaden their ideas about schools and how they can be most effective. Finally, this guide includes a resource list of organizations, publications, and videos that can aid further discussion and action.

You are free to photocopy any portion of this guide. We encourage you to adapt it to the needs of your community or organization.

We at the Study Circles Resource Center want to hear from you. We can assist you with your program and put you in touch with others who are organizing similar programs. We also want to learn from you so that we can more fully document the ways in which communities are using public dialogue to meet one of the most important challenges our society faces.

Introduction

New challenges for our society and our schools

Twenty years ago, what we wanted out of our schools seemed clear-cut. We expected that high school graduates would have a good grasp of reading, writing, and math, would know how to be responsible citizens, and would have the skills to compete for an average entry-level job or to qualify for college admission.

Today, when we consider the new challenges confronting education – and our whole society – it seems especially difficult to know what we should expect of our schools:

♦ **Jobs are changing.** The skills that used to qualify high school graduates for entry-level jobs in established trades or for further training in the professions are no longer enough. Faced with tougher global competition, businesses require higher levels of knowledge and skills from their employees. In addition, the number of manufacturing jobs is decreasing while the number of jobs in service industries such as retail stores and fast-food restaurants is increasing. Most service jobs pay wages that are too low to cover basic living expenses and offer little hope for advancement. Schools have the difficult task of preparing graduates for an uncertain economic future.

♦ **Racial and ethnic tensions are growing.** Many cities and towns are rapidly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, even while people of different backgrounds usually remain separated from each other in their neighborhoods and social lives. The schools in these communities may be the only place where people from different racial groups come together. The separation and tensions that exist in the larger community often surface in these schools, presenting a challenge that has an impact on all of society: How can we learn to live together?

Meanwhile, in some metropolitan areas, schools are once again becoming segregated. In some communities, there is still little racial or ethnic diversity. Schools in these communities must deal with a different challenge: How do we begin to know about people from different backgrounds when we have no contact with them?

♦ **There is a wide income gap between many urban and suburban communities.** The differences in income and tax revenues between urban and suburban communities present severe challenges to society and to schools. Many of the students with the greatest needs go to the schools with the fewest resources. In some states, per capita spending in the wealthiest school districts is five times higher than is per capita spending in the poorest districts. In an economy with few entry-level jobs that provide opportunities for advancement, these unequally funded school systems may create permanent "classes" in our society. In addition, these urban-suburban divisions often follow the lines of race. Since many whites and middle-class blacks have fled the urban centers, many black and Hispanic students are going to school in inner cities where there are few job opportunities or mentors to help them get ahead.

♦ **Families are changing.** In just a generation, the structure of the average American family has changed dramatically. One-fourth of all children are growing up in single-parent homes. In many of these homes, of all income levels and races, absent fathers provide little in financial support and spend little time with their children. Even in many of the homes where there are two parents, both parents work. As the family changes in these ways, adults are spending less time with young people. Teachers often feel that they must take on parenting tasks on top of trying to teach children who are unprepared for learning.

♦ **There is a growing concern about values.** Many people have the sense that something has gone wrong with our moral standards. Aside from the religious values that people may disagree about, commonly shared values such as honesty, respect, and responsibility seem to be in decline. When it comes to the behavior of young people, some people look to the schools for help, thinking that families, churches, and other institutions have failed. On the other hand, teachers who are forced to spend their days enforcing discipline know that schools alone can't teach young people values. Adding to the problem is the fact that teachers and parents often ask their children and students to live up to standards that adults don't live up to in their own lives.

♦ **Violence is on the rise.** Domestic violence, which affects millions of children, is on the rise. And street violence, which used to involve mainly young adults, is affecting younger and younger people. Today, not even schools are safe. Violence is entering schools everywhere, taking the forms of harassment, fistfights, and even gang- and drug-related shootings. In 1988, only 2% of the nation's 50 largest school districts used metal detectors. By 1993, 50% of these schools were using them. Students and school staff not only face immediate safety problems, but are left to deal with the long-term effects of violence on motivation, learning, and emotional well-being.

These new challenges have a powerful and immediate impact on our schools and on what we expect them to accomplish. Though they affect different communities in different ways, one thing is clear: Community members, inside and outside the schools, need to think about how we should educate our young people. We must discuss our best ideas and work together to develop strategies to improve education.

Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and people representing all sectors of the community must reconsider the most basic questions about education: What do we want our students to know and be able to do? What can schools do to help them achieve these goals? What can we do, in our various roles in the community, to improve education? *How can schools and communities work together to meet the challenge of education?*

Session 1

How have schools affected our lives, and how do they affect our community?

The purpose of this session is to give you the opportunity to share your personal experiences, stories, and perspectives about schools. Since personal experiences often shape our ideas and beliefs, this session lays a foundation for the rest of your study circle. It will also set the tone for open, thoughtful discussion.

These questions provide some starting points for the discussion:

1. Think back. What was school like for you? What did you like and dislike? (For students, talk about what school is like for you today. What do you like and dislike?)

2. How do you think today's schools are different from the schools you attended? (For students, how do you think today's schools are different from the schools your parents attended?)

3. What do you think are the most pressing challenges facing the schools in our community?

4. What do you think are our greatest strengths, both inside and outside the schools, for dealing with the challenges we face?

5. What kind of relationships do our schools have with parents, businesses, community organizations, religious institutions, the media, and other sectors of the community? In what ways can schools and other sectors of the community better communicate with each other and work together?

6. Based on your experiences, what kind of impact do you think schools have on the community? For example, how does the quality of our graduates affect the community?

7. How have your personal experiences influenced your definition of a good education? How have they influenced your ideas about what it means to be an educated person?

8. How have your personal experiences shaped your ideas about what our community's schools should try to accomplish?

Session 2

What do we want our graduates to know and be able to do?

The best way to create a basis for productive community involvement in the schools is for community members to share ideas about their goals and visions for education.

This session provides the opportunity to consider some very different views about what our graduates should know and be able to do. Each of the views is written in the voice of a person who thinks this particular skill or kind of knowledge should have high priority. Don't feel that you or your group needs to choose one of the views. Rather, use them to start your discussion and to develop your own thinking about what is most important.

View 1 - Graduates must have a strong grounding in the basics.

According to this view, every graduate should be able to read, write, and do math at functional levels. Without a solid foundation in these skills, students can't learn anything else. Also, graduates can't succeed in most jobs or at fundamental life tasks, such as managing a budget, without these skills. We should be careful about expanding the definition of "basics" too far. When we try to teach too much, we end up shortchanging the subjects that are critical.

View 2 - Graduates must have job skills.

According to this view, graduates must know the basics, but they must also have the higher-level skills that will make them employable in jobs that offer living wages. We must teach technical skills such as computer competence, "people skills" such as the ability to work in teams, and traits such as dependability and adaptability. We must offer apprenticeships, internships, and school-to-work transition programs. When students know that their education will help them get a good job, they will be more motivated to learn.

View 3 - Graduates must have strong character.

According to this view, the most important thing we can do is to prepare our students to be responsible, mature adults. A narrow focus on academics is not enough, since in real life many other traits are more important for success and fulfillment. Basic values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, accountability, and service to others are vital. If we don't teach those values, graduates won't have the moral strength to be good family members, workers, and community members.

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What do you think our graduates should know and be able to do? Which view (or combination of views) best describes what you think? Why?

2. What other responses would you add to the list?

3. Of the view(s) you think are most important, which do you think schools should concentrate on?

4. If schools can't take on all that is important, how would you set priorities for what the schools *should* do?

5. What experiences and beliefs lead you to your ideas?

6. As you listen to others' ideas, try to learn why they hold their views. What new insights or different ways of thinking do you gain from others in your study circle?

7. What are the common ideas in your group about what graduates should know and be able to do?

8. What new ideas do you have about how you and others in the community can help schools achieve the goals you think are most important?

Community Goals and *Goals 2000*

In 1990, the Department of Education adopted a list of goals for education in America, to be achieved by the year 2000. This set of goals, called *Goals 2000*, covers areas such as academic achievement, young children's readiness for school, and school safety.

The *Goals 2000* report (which is available from the Department of Education; see resource list) can be a useful resource for people who are trying to decide what the educational goals of their community should be. But it cannot replace the need for people to set goals for their own communities.

Goals are meaningful only if community members and educators have a chance to talk about them, decide which are most important, decide how to achieve them, and then work together.

View 4 - Graduates must have skills for everyday life.

According to this view, young people need certain skills and information just to survive. We need to teach practical skills such as establishing a workable budget and balancing a checkbook. The breakdown of families and communities shows that we must teach basic human relations skills that graduates can use in work settings and in family life. Students need to know how to get along with others and how to constructively settle disagreements. We must communicate the hard realities of parental responsibilities, of sexually transmitted diseases, and of substance abuse.

View 5 - Graduates must be ready to learn *throughout* their lives.

According to this view, the most important thing we can do is to help students know *how* to learn. They must be able to communicate effectively, think critically, solve problems, search out information, and work in teams, since those are the kinds of skills that they can apply to any new learning situation that they will face. Today's high school or college graduates can expect to change jobs many times in their lifetimes, and we must prepare them to learn quickly in new situations.

View 6 - Graduates must have the skills to participate in public life.

According to this view, graduates need to have basic democratic skills and attitudes so that they can contribute to their communities and the country. Students need practice in thinking critically about social and political issues, in building consensus, and in decision-making. They also need to learn the practice of community service. Too few of our graduates know that they can make a difference in their communities and the country, or *how* to make a difference. With the problems facing our society, we must have citizens with these skills.

View 7 - Graduates must have a well-rounded, liberal arts education.

According to this view, our graduates must, above all, be prepared for college. Even though not all students will choose to go to college, all graduates should have the academic preparation they need to make college a viable option. That means a student must be educated as a "whole person" - receiving a solid foundation in math, science, literature, history, languages, and the arts. In addition to academics, students should explore music, drama, athletics, and other facets of a well-rounded education. Graduates can get specialized skills in colleges and technical schools. Before then, they need many opportunities to develop their minds and their bodies.

What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools so that students will have the skills they need when they graduate. Some ideas:

Individuals can volunteer as classroom aides, mentor or tutor students, bring unique talents to the classroom for special learning units, lead extracurricular activities such as athletics, organize field trips, and talk with educators about educational goals.

Small groups of concerned citizens can facilitate partnerships between schools and businesses, run seminars in character education or life skills for students, strengthen parent involvement and parent education, and help make the school a center for adult learning in the community.

Community organizations can create apprenticeship and internship programs, donate equipment to schools, raise money for education, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools.

Session 3 – Issues in education

On the following pages you'll find suggestions for discussion sessions on four different topics:

Session 3A – How can we meet every student's needs?

Session 3B – How can we make our schools safer?

Session 3C – How can we deal with racial and ethnic diversity?

Session 3D – How can we provide a quality education with limited resources?

Choose the session or sessions that best fit your community's needs, or use these as models for developing discussion material on *your* community's most critical issues.

Session 3A

How can we meet every student's needs?

One of the greatest challenges in educating any person is finding ways to meet his or her distinct needs. Some young people have particular physical or learning difficulties. Others have unusual strengths, such as an aptitude for science or a gift for art. Every person has unique interests and ways of learning.

This challenge is magnified in the classroom, since teachers are responsible for not just one student, but for an entire group. Even students who are the same age have a wide range of strengths, needs, and skills. It is not obvious which approach schools should take, and in some communities this issue is a matter of controversy.

This session provides an opportunity for you to consider some views about how to meet every student's needs. Some views focus on what the schools should do, and others include parents and community members. The views overlap, so don't feel that you or your group must choose one. Rather, use them as a way to think about the challenge from different angles, to weigh pros and cons, and to come up with your own approach to meeting every student's needs.

View 1 – Group students according to abilities and special needs.

According to this view, the most effective way to teach is to place students into groups by ability, a practice sometimes called "tracking." Many schools operate this way. Students learn best when the teacher can present concepts at a pace that is comfortable for everyone in the group. When students of different ability levels are grouped together, it is easy for students to become either overwhelmed or bored. On the other hand, when students are grouped by ability level they have a better chance to succeed and are more likely to keep trying. Some students are motivated by the possibility of moving to a more advanced group.

Students who are unusually talented and gifted need their own classes and groups so that they can fully develop their abilities. These students will be our future leaders: we must nurture them and provide settings where they are motivated to strive for excellence.

Children with special needs such as physical or learning disabilities also require their own classes so

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What do you think is the best way to meet every student's needs?

2. Of the views, is there one (or a combination) that best describes your ideas, and why? Are there other ideas you would like to add?

3. What experiences and beliefs have helped form your ideas?

4. As you listen to others describe what has shaped their views, what new insights and ideas do you gain?

5. What are your greatest concerns about how our schools are trying to meet every student's needs? What do you think the schools should do?

6. What are the common concerns or ideas in your group about how best to meet every student's needs?

7. What new ideas do you have about helping to meet every student's needs?

they can get special help. Placing them in classes with other students is not fair to them, since they are unlikely to get the attention they need.

View 2 - Teach all students together.

According to this view, "tracking" is unfair and is not the best way for students to learn. Students in the lower tracks are thought of as slow, and they begin to doubt their own ability to learn. They usually get a less challenging curriculum that stresses lower-level skills. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: since less is expected of these students, they are less successful.

When tracking starts early, children who start kindergarten with less preparation are placed into lower levels. Since students usually remain in their original groups, it is difficult for these children to overcome their late start. By high school, the division between the "high" and the "low" groups, which often follows class and race lines, has become entrenched.

Advanced students learn at least as well when they are grouped with others of different ability levels as when they are grouped by ability level. That is because students learn well when they learn with others who think differently or who have different kinds of strengths. Most people thrive in a cooperative learning environment.

Whenever practical, children with special needs should be placed in regular classrooms. Many of them benefit greatly when the children around them exhibit the academic or social skills they are trying to master. Special-needs children also provide unique learning opportunities for the other students. In these settings, students can develop empathy, see how people can succeed in spite of personal challenges, and learn to see the world in new ways.

View 3 - We should focus on parenting skills and parental involvement.

According to this view, how schools teach is not as important as what happens in the home. By the time children get to first grade, the most important stage in their education has already passed. The life skills and attitudes toward learning that very young children develop at home are critical in preparing them for school and life. Young people continue to need attention and encouragement from their parents throughout their schooling.

Teachers and parents need to work closely together. Some parents feel uncomfortable going into their children's schools, often because of the way they feel about their own school experiences. Teachers and administrators must reach out to all parents and build relationships with them. Parents must make it clear to teachers that they want to support them and work cooperatively with them.

Many parents feel isolated and unsure of how to be a good parent. With changes in families, parenting can be very difficult: it's harder to be a parent when there is only one adult in the home or when both parents work outside the home. Also, parents often have no members of their extended family nearby.

Some communities offer parent education or support groups to help parents:

- learn how to give their preschoolers a good start for a lifetime of learning
- learn how to more effectively discipline their children
- learn how to deal with the challenges and frustrations of parenting
- think about their relationships with their children
- build supportive relationships with other parents
- learn how to keep track of what their children are learning in school and learn ways to express their concerns and questions to teachers
- learn ways to help their children with homework
- improve their own basic skills in reading, math, or English.

View 4 - We must have high expectations of *all* students.

According to this view, we need to have the same high goals and hopes for all students that we've typically had for only a small number of academically "gifted" students. All young people can achieve remarkable things if they are challenged and supported by teachers and parents. They deserve the opportunity to realize their full potential and develop their strengths.

The most critical element for the success of all students is for parents, teachers, principals, coaches, and other adults to believe in them. We must never give up on any young person.

In reality, some young children who come to school are not as well-prepared as others. In these cases, it can be difficult to see their potential. But these young people and their families need more support, not less. Effective leaders in schools and the community must work to provide that support.

It is also important to be aware of the influence of our biases and stereotypes. Some teachers or parents, for example, expect less of girls, particularly in math and science. Some people expect less from low-income families, or from black or Hispanic students, or from non-native-English speakers. These low expectations reinforce the negative messages that are common in society. Often, when educators and parents become aware of their own biases, they can begin to teach in ways that bring out the best in all young people.

What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to help meet the needs of every student. Some ideas:

Individuals can mentor or tutor students, teach English to parents whose native language is not English, volunteer for preschool programs, and take part in extracurricular activities.

Small groups of concerned citizens can strengthen parent involvement, run parent education workshops, give recognition to student achievements, build playground equipment that is suitable for many levels of physical ability, and work with educators to change existing school policies.

Community organizations can sponsor students to take university courses, foster student-run businesses, create internship programs, support education programs for parents and preschoolers, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools.

Session 3B

How can we make our schools safer?

Students and teachers need to feel safe in order for learning to take place. Sadly, in a growing number of our communities, young people are afraid to go to school because of the crime and violence they encounter on the way to school or in the school itself.

Schools and communities are exploring ways to prevent violence and to make their schools safe. This session provides four views on how we can best do this. Use them as a starting point for your discussion and for developing your own view of how to approach this problem.

View 1 – We need to make sure that young people have adult guidance.

According to this view, in class, at home, and in their neighborhoods, young people need the encouragement and discipline that only adults can provide. Many young people don't have adults around to guide them. In addition, many adults don't work together to support and guide young people. Often parents and teachers don't regularly communicate with each other about how young people are doing. Young people need a community of adults who know them and hold them accountable for their actions. They need schools where parents and other community members are involved. In addition to supervision at home, youngsters need after-school activities where adults can coach, tutor, and mentor them.

View 2 – We should teach students the skills they need to resolve conflict without violence.

According to this view, many young people see and hear violence all the time – in music, on television, in the schoolyard, on the streets, or at home. These influences make it more likely that they will use violence to resolve their conflicts. We must teach young people the skills they need to handle violent situations, to resolve conflicts, and to help other young people work out their disputes more peacefully. At the same time, adults must resolve their own conflicts without violence, so that young people will have positive examples to follow.

View 3 – We must address the major social problems in our communities that lead to youth violence.

According to this view, young people who are hungry, who come from broken homes, and who see little hope for their future are more likely to act

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. Have you ever feared for your physical safety while in school? If so, how did you handle the situation?

2. What kinds of violence do students and teachers face in our community's schools?

3. What do you think is the major cause of violence in our schools?

4. What do you think the community should do to help make the schools safe? Of the views, is there one (or a combination) that best describes your ideas, and why?

5. As you listen to others describe their views, what new ideas or insights do you gain?

6. What are the common concerns among group members? What are the key areas of agreement and disagreement? Where is there common ground on what should be done?

7. What is already going on in our schools and community to address concerns about violence in the schools? What new ideas and suggestions do you have?

violently. If we are going to reduce the violence that is affecting our young people and entering our schools, the community must address its root causes. School programs such as free meals for students from low-income families are just a beginning. School-based social services for students and their families can address some basic problems at a deeper level. The community, and especially businesses, must offer jobs, internships, training, and hope for a brighter future. All sectors of the community must contribute and work together. By coordinating their efforts, they will be better able to identify and assist the young people who are most at risk.

View 4 - We should demand high standards of behavior from our young people.

According to this view, as a society we are much more lenient than we used to be. In homes and schools we often tolerate rude and disrespectful behavior. When "acting out" and violent behavior go unchecked, they usually get worse. Teachers, parents, and other adults who are responsible for young people must set and enforce stricter behavior standards. Young people should know that when they violate those standards, they will face consequences. Some schools, for example, set policies of "zero tolerance" for gang-related clothing or activities.

What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to make schools safer. Some ideas:

Individuals can monitor school hallways and routes to school, volunteer for anti-violence programs, serve as mentors for students, and help all the young people they know to avoid situations that are likely to be violent and to resolve their conflicts without violence.

Small groups of concerned citizens can run conflict resolution and substance abuse prevention seminars for students, help students run peer mediation and peer leadership programs, and organize patrols of school hallways and school grounds.

Community organizations can finance extra-curricular activities for young people, sponsor public information campaigns against violence, provide free breakfasts and lunches for students, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools. Businesses can provide jobs, internships, apprenticeships, and training for young people.

Session 3C

How can we deal with racial and ethnic diversity?

Race has been a major issue throughout our history, particularly in relation to African-Americans. As we have dealt with the aftermath of slavery and with each wave of immigration, we have struggled toward equality for people of all races and ethnic groups.

Now, the racial and ethnic makeup of our society is changing once again. The large wave of Latino and Asian immigration that began in the 1980s is continuing. By the year 2000, one in three Americans will be a person of color.

Public schools have often been at the center of our struggles about race and ethnicity. This session provides an opportunity to consider several views about how our schools should deal with racial and ethnic diversity.

View 1 - Focus on a core set of Western values and traditions.

According to this view, in the past our country dealt with waves of immigrants by teaching them Western cultural heritage. It's vital for us to do that today, so that our schools will be a unifying force in our society. In English, history, and social studies classes, young people need to learn about the Western tradition and the core literature, traditions, and values that bind our nation together. Teaching about different cultures is good in theory. But in reality there is not enough time in school to teach the fundamentals of our Western values and to cover a multicultural curriculum. People from different races and ethnic backgrounds are never going to get along if we value the things that separate us more than the things that unify us.

View 2 - Study different cultures, but emphasize our common bonds.

According to this view, the United States is a "melting pot" of many cultures. We have a core set of values - democracy, freedom and equality - that unites us and makes all of us American. This description of our country is so important that it is printed on our currency: *E pluribus unum*, which means "Out of many, one." We should teach both our multicultural history and our common values to students. In English, history, and social studies classes, students should learn about European and non-European cultures and about the contributions of all ethnic groups to our communities and our country. This will convey a more accurate view of history and our society, and affirm the cultures and contributions of all Americans. At the same time, whether in our books or in our classrooms, we should treat students as Americans, rather than as African-Americans, European-Americans, or Asian-Americans.

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What are your greatest concerns about how our schools are dealing with racial and ethnic diversity?

2. What do you think is the best way to deal with racial and ethnic diversity? Which of the views best describes what you think, and why?

3. What personal experiences and beliefs have shaped your ideas?

4. As you listen to others describe their views, what new ideas or insights do you gain?

5. Are there common concerns among group members? Where is there common ground on what should be done?

6. What ideas and suggestions do you have for helping to carry out the ideas you support?

View 3 - Strengthen our cultural identities and celebrate our differences.

According to this view, before students learn about a "common heritage," they need to strengthen their own cultural identities and ethnic pride. The myth of the American melting pot that has long been taught in our schools has covered over the painful realities in our history. Instead, school curriculum should honor the struggles and strengths of many cultures. Students also need to strengthen their attachments to their own ethnic groups. In some communities, this may mean setting up Afro-centric schools or teaching in both Spanish and English. In all cases it means that we must help our students acknowledge and respect the important differences that result from our various cultural heritages and experiences, and encourage students to re-examine what it means to be an American.

View 4 - Integrate the schools.

According to this view, racial tension and separation is one of the central problems of our entire society. If we don't learn to value each other's differences and at the same time realize that we face common problems, we will fail as a society. It's not enough for students to read books about people of other races and ethnic groups, to meet different kinds of people once in a while, or to have discussions about how to get along with other kinds of people. Our students must come into daily contact with people from different backgrounds. Racial and ethnic segregation between schools and school districts keeps this from happening. The best way to prepare people for diverse societies is to have diverse schools. Only when integration has taken place can our schools begin to help students value each other and learn to get along.

What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to help them deal with racial and ethnic diversity. Some ideas:

Individuals can volunteer to help with civic or cultural school trips and events, learn another language that is common in their community, teach English to parents whose native language is not English, help set up culture fairs, and serve on committees that are making plans for school integration or school choice.

Small groups of concerned citizens can provide extracurricular activities that allow people of different cultures to interact, sponsor school activities to coincide with community events that promote cultural awareness, help overcome racial and ethnic barriers among parents, and work with educators to change existing policies.

Community organizations can sponsor student trips to civic or cultural institutions or events, support internships in civic or cultural organizations, sponsor study circle programs on race relations, and propose plans for school integration or school choice.

Session 3D

How can we provide a quality education with limited resources?

The purpose of this session is for you to consider the available resources in your community and think of how best to use them to provide a quality education. When most people hear the word "resources," they think about school budgets and taxes. While taxes and spending are critical to this discussion, many communities have begun to look at resources more broadly. In these communities, they are enlisting many community groups outside the schools to contribute to education, through volunteerism, school-business partnerships, and financial support.

The seven views below describe different ideas about how we can expand, allocate, or better utilize resources to provide a quality education. Use them as a starting point for your discussion, to weigh pros and cons, to develop your own approach, and to search for common concerns in the group.

View 1 – Quality is expensive, so we should increase the resources we give to schools.

According to this view, if we want quality education, we have to pay for it. We're asking a lot of our schools, and we're going to have to find ways to give them the resources they need. This might mean increasing property taxes and school spending, but it's worth it. A good educational system is essential to a healthy, prosperous community. Community members and groups also need to contribute to schools in new ways. They can volunteer in the schools or in early learning programs, raise funds for educational activities, and create partnerships between the schools and other community organizations. We must convince a greater number of community members that a quality education is valuable and that all of us must contribute to it.

View 2 – We should develop specific, high standards and hold schools accountable to them.

According to this view, most schools could provide a quality education if they clearly understood what they had to accomplish in order to be judged a success by their communities. We must set clear standards and then hold administrators, teachers, and students accountable to them. For example, students should be promoted to the next grade only when they pass a year-end exam that tests specific goals set by the community. Teachers who demonstrate excellence, or who show improvement according to com-

As you read and discuss the views, consider these questions:

1. What are your greatest concerns about resources for education in our community?

2. As you consider the views, which best describes your thoughts about how we can provide a quality education with limited resources? Why?

3. What personal experiences and beliefs have shaped your view? As other group members express their views, how do they influence your thinking?

4. What are the common concerns in your group? Where is there common ground on what should be done? What are the key areas of agreement and disagreement?

5. What do you think *our* schools could do to expand resources or to use available resources more effectively?

6. What do you think community members and organizations could do to help our schools provide a quality education with limited resources?

munity standards, should receive raises and promotions. The schools that demonstrate measurable improvement should be the ones to receive more funding. We must reward and acknowledge the students, teachers, and schools that demonstrate improvement and excellence.

View 3 - We should allow families and students to choose their schools.

According to this view, giving families the right to choose the public school their children will attend is a powerful way to raise the quality of education. School choice provides incentives for improvement: if a school cannot attract students, it will lose funding in the future. School choice can lead to greater flexibility for administrators and teachers in deciding how to run their schools and classrooms. Also, since each school in a system of choice must make itself marketable, educators have incentives to more fully develop their own unique knowledge and talents. As another benefit, school choice can begin to achieve racial diversity in schools because it will lead to desirable schools that attract a mix of students. The right to choose is a traditional value in America, and we should apply it to education.

View 4 - We must let schools manage themselves.

According to this view, most school systems are bureaucratic and inefficient. Teachers and principals are unable to make even the simplest decisions without going through miles of red tape at the district office. We must give schools the freedom they need to provide a quality education. When given the opportunity, teachers and principals around the country have found creative and efficient ways to achieve high goals in the classroom and in the school as a whole. In many places, schools have decided to share management with the community by including parents and other community members in their local decision-making processes. We should allow our schools the freedom to manage and improve themselves, and they will deliver.

View 5 - We must devote sufficient resources to the schools that face the greatest challenges.

According to this view, the most serious problem is not that most of our schools are mediocre. Rather, the schools in our poorest communities don't have the basic resources they need to educate their students. Schools in poorer areas often have old, poorly maintained buildings, crowded classrooms, and few courses for students beyond the basic requirements. Meanwhile, schools in wealthy areas have good buildings, smaller class sizes, and many extracurricular offerings. Even though money alone can't create good schools, we can't have good schools without adequate funding. We have two increasingly separate educational systems. We must do more for the communities and the schools that have the fewest resources and face the greatest challenges.

View 6 - We must achieve racial diversity in the schools.

According to this view, the first and most important requirement for a quality education is racial diversity. The historic 1954 Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case made this clear when it asserted that separate schools are inherently unequal. Nobody can get a quality education in isolation from people of different backgrounds and racial groups. Increasingly, we have two separate, segregated educational systems, and that is what must

What can we do?
Ideas for further discussion

There are many ways in which community members can work together with schools to provide quality education with limited resources. Some ideas:

Individuals can volunteer in classrooms and child care centers, tutor students, keep track of how schools are meeting their standards and goals, talk with teachers about how they can help their children meet the year's education goals, and volunteer to assist with extracurricular activities.

Small groups of concerned citizens can encourage partnerships between schools and businesses, help raise funds for schools, propose plans for school integration or school choice, run child care centers, and monitor school standards and efficiency.

Community organizations can establish child care centers, create magnet or charter schools, serve on commissions that monitor the schools, donate equipment to schools, raise money for education, publicize and present awards to outstanding schools and teachers, and encourage their members to volunteer in the schools.

change. Interracial contact itself will not provide a quality education for everyone, but it is an essential requirement. However this is accomplished, through first integrating our neighborhoods or through school integration plans, it will result in a more equal distribution of resources to our schools.

View 7 - We must support early childhood education.

According to this view, the first several years of a child's life are the most important learning years. If young children have supportive environments and positive learning experiences, they are much more likely to succeed in school. Today, when most parents spend less time with their preschool children, day care centers and preschools must provide many critical early learning experiences. Whether in the home or other settings, the most efficient way to raise the quality of education in our schools is to think consciously about our children's education *before* they go to school. We can detect many learning problems in their early stages and deal with them before they hinder schooling. In addition, we can give every child a strong start for a lifetime of learning through effective early childhood education at home or elsewhere. We must support the families and professionals in our community who work with very young children.

Session 4

Making a difference: What can we do in our community?

As the challenges to education grow, many community members and community groups are finding ways to help schools meet those challenges. At the same time, many schools are finding ways to reach out to their communities. All kinds of people and groups are making a difference in education.

This session describes some of the ways we can improve education – in our homes and neighborhoods, in our schools, and in the organizations we belong to. It provides an opportunity for you to think about new ways to get involved.

Coming together to learn from each other and develop our ideas about education is a critical form of action. Finding ways to continue this dialogue and to include more community members is a valuable next step. In some communities, study circles lead to action groups, where some of the participants implement the ideas they develop during their study circle.

What can we do in our homes and neighborhoods to improve education?

Whether as parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, godparents, day care providers, or neighbors, many people come into regular contact with young people. While people may endorse different parenting practices, practically everyone agrees that the most decisive factor in a young person's life is the presence of caring adults.

In addition to "being there" for a young person, there are many ways that parents and other mentors can contribute to a youngster's education:

- Read to and talk with the children in your life. After they can read by themselves, keep reading together, and talking with them about what they're reading and what they think.
- Model civil, honest, respectful, and responsible behavior toward others, and expect the same from young people.
- Listen to and talk with the young people in your life – about their concerns, their friends, what is happening in school, what they are learning and want to learn, their homework, and what they are watching on television.
- Share your ideas with your children and other young people in your life, and ask them what they think.

Discussion questions

1. What can we do in our own homes to improve education? What can we do as individuals?

2. What are the channels of communication between the schools and the community? How might those be improved?

3. What is already going on in the community in terms of improving education? What organizations – businesses, civic organizations, nonprofits – are involved in improving education? What other organizations might help, and how can we approach them?

4. How have communities similar to ours effectively addressed challenges like the ones we face? How can we learn more about those efforts, and how can we use what we learn?

5. What are the strengths of our community and our schools? What assets have gone untapped? How can we put those assets to work?

6. What steps do we want to take? What type of support or help do we need to take these steps?

- Get to know the children in your neighborhood, and help others do the same by organizing small-scale neighborhood events.

- Get together with other parents in your child's classroom and talk about your concerns and ideas.

- Attend teacher conferences and parent nights, and try to keep in regular contact with teachers and the school.

- Go to teachers and administrators with your questions and concerns on a regular basis. Ask about what your child is learning, how he or she is doing, and what you can do to help.

- Many communities offer parenting seminars, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and refresher classes in math and English so that parents can understand what their kids are learning. Participate in the classes you think will help you.

How can schools connect to the community?

Many teachers would like to see more parents and other community members supporting education and becoming involved in the schools.

The most common frustration teachers have with parent groups is that they usually represent only a small part of the school's parents. Often racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented, few parents from low-income families attend, and women vastly outnumber men.

Following are ways that actual schools have successfully reached out to parents, including some parents who might not usually get involved:

- The Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project provides English as a Second Language workshops after school for non-English-speaking parents, using other parents as volunteers. The workshops have boosted attendance at parent group meetings and strengthened communication between teachers and individual parents.

- A Philadelphia school realized that many of its parents weren't attending "back to school night" because it wasn't providing them with information they could use. The parent group organized a seminar called "How to Help Your Child Succeed With Homework," and attendance at the event increased ten-fold.

- Parents at Croton-Harmon High School in New York held discussion groups centering on the question, "What should our graduates know and be able to do?" The opportunity to talk broadly about goals brought out many parents who had not been involved in the school before.

- Family Math Night at P.S. 146 in East Harlem has been a big success. Parents and students

Lessons from the Community

I went everywhere with my parents and was under the watchful eye of members of the congregation and community who were my extended parents. They kept me when my parents went out of town, they reported on and chided me when I strayed from the straight and narrow of community expectations, and they basked in and supported my achievements when I did well. Doing well, they made clear, meant high academic achievement, playing piano in Sunday school or singing or participating in other church activities, being helpful to somebody, displaying good manners (which is nothing more than consideration toward others), and reading.

My sister Olive reminded me recently that the only time our father would not give us a chore ("Can't you find something constructive to do?" was his most common refrain) was when we were reading. So we all read a lot! We learned early what our parents and extended community "parents" valued.

Children were taught - not by sermonizing, but by personal example - that nothing was too lowly to do. I remember a debate my parents had when I was eight or nine as to whether I was too young to go with my older brother, Harry, to help clean the bed and bedsores of a very sick, poor woman. I went and learned just how much the smallest helping hands and kindness can mean to a person in need.

- Marian Wright Edelman
The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours

learn math together and parents learn how to help with homework.

- Buffalo's Chapter 1 Parent Resource Center provides a place for regular meetings between parents and teachers, provides materials and information for parents to take home, and gives parents an opportunity to practice new skills and meet other parents.

- The Minneapolis Public Schools used study circles to involve parents and other community members in deciding whether to adopt school choice, maintain the current system, or create a couple of magnet schools and leave the rest of the system the same. Forty study circles met for several sessions, and influenced new performance standards and planning initiatives for the school district.

Schools often seem isolated from their communities. Keeping school buildings open after the school day and making the school facilities available for other community functions can help more parents and community members feel a connection to the school. Schools around the country are using innovative ways to make the school a community center:

- School District Four in New York City has a lively after-school program that includes a seven-week summer camp for children and adults, and a variety of tutorial and recreational activities for people of all ages.

- In Rockville, Maryland, senior citizens read stories and play games with young schoolchildren after school and on Saturdays, through a program administered by the local Senior Center.

- Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire, brings in community members who are knowledgeable in particular fields to serve on juries for student academic exhibitions.

- The School-Based Youth Services Program in New Jersey has established "one-stop centers" at 29 high schools to provide health services, job training and counseling, mental health counseling, and child care. Making the school the center for social services strengthens the link between schools and parents.

"Old-Fashioned Democratic Virtues"

After a decade of education reform efforts, most high schools remain about the same, and some college educators claim that the writing and thinking skills of entering freshmen continue to get worse every year. . . .

I believe that we are running out of time. What we need to improve schools are not new policy gimmicks, a national curriculum, or more multiple-choice tests, but rather some old-fashioned democratic virtues - courageous leadership, greater clarity and consensus about goals, and many kinds of cooperative ventures to develop new strategies. The high school of the future must be invented in many individual schools and towns by groups of active citizens working together to define and teach real adult competencies, to create community, and to express more active caring for the next generation.

- Tony Wagner
"Improving High Schools: The Case for New Goals and Strategies"
Phi Delta Kappan, May 1993

How can community organizations connect with the schools?

Most community members belong to many different organizations within the community. They work for a business, government, or nonprofit organization; they belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque; they are students at or alumni of local universities; they belong to a civic organization or political party; or they participate in some kind of club or recreation league. We can help education meet new challenges by enlisting the help of these and other community organizations.

- Most of the students at Messalonskee High School in Oakland, Maine, are involved in public service projects. They host block parties, raise money for children in poverty, and volunteer at homeless shelters. Most of their "team leaders" are adult volunteers from the community.

- The Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce created a Partners-in-Education program that links local

businesses to individual schools for a year of ongoing activities, including apprenticeships, instruction in technology, factory tours, and classroom presentations.

- Members of the First Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas, arranged to guide field trips and do arts and crafts workshops with children at a local school which had a high number of low-income families. They have also organized a consortium of local organizations such as the YWCA and the Lion's Club to provide services for the children.

- The Baltimore Learning Network, run by community volunteers, coordinates projects that link the schools to the city's cultural institutions. The Network makes it possible for students to spend time at the aquarium, the science center, the zoo, museums, libraries, theaters, businesses, and government agencies.

What is a study circle?

A dozen people are comfortably seated around a living room or meeting room, one speaking, several others looking as though they would like to make a point, one skimming an article as if searching for a particular item, another scanning the group, and the others listening attentively. This is a study circle in action.

A study circle is made up of 5 to 15 people who agree to meet together several times to learn about a social or political issue in a democratic and collaborative way. Complex issues are broken down into manageable subdivisions, and controversial topics are dealt with in depth. Reading material serves to stimulate the discussion and provides a common reference point.

Philosophy and background

As an informal, practical, and effective way to promote adult learning and social change, the study circle is rooted in the civic movements of 19th century America. Today, the use of study circles and similar small-group discussion programs is growing rapidly in the United States and many other places around the world.

Study circles are voluntary and highly participatory. They assist participants in confronting challenging issues and in making difficult choices. Study circles engage citizens in public and organizational concerns, bringing the wisdom of ordinary people to bear on difficult issues. Cooperation and participation are stressed so that the group can capitalize on the experience of all its members.

The study circle is small-group democracy in action. All viewpoints are taken seriously, and each member has an equal opportunity to participate. The process - democratic discussion among equals - is as important as the content.

Roles

The study circle leader is vital to the group's success. The leader makes sure the discussion is lively but focused. He or she models respectful listening and encourages participants to share their knowledge, experiences, and opinions. Some people find it helpful to share this task with a co-leader.

The study circle organizer - who may be the same person as the leader - selects the reading material, recruits participants, arranges the logistics for the meetings, and chooses the discussion leader.

Participants, whose commitment and interest are essential for a study circle's success, ultimately "own" the study circle. Their clear understanding of both their role and the leader's role helps create a democratic and collaborative environment.

Goals

The goal of a study circle is to deepen participants' understanding of an issue by focusing on the values that underlie opinions. Perhaps the most important question a study circle leader can ask is: "What experiences or beliefs might lead decent and caring people to support that point of view?" The group works through difficult issues and grapples with the choices that society or their organization is facing. Study circles seek "common ground" - that is, areas of general agreement - but consensus or compromise is not necessary.

Study circles differ from typical meetings in that they do not begin with a specific desired outcome. *Deliberation* is the goal. However, study circles often

lead to social and political action, both by individual participants and by the group.

Suitability to a variety of organizations

Churches and synagogues, civic and community groups, businesses, advocacy organizations, schools, and unions - as well as citywide coalitions including a variety of organizations - have all used study circles to help their members consider vital issues. Sponsorship of study circles provides opportunities for members to gain knowledge, power, and improved communication skills in an enjoyable and challenging setting.

Variations on the basic format

There are many variations on the basic format for a study circle. Ideally, study circles meet once a week for at least three sessions, but other schedules can also work well. For example, some organizations combine study circles with their regular monthly meetings. For those groups that cannot meet regularly, a workshop format can be used at a conference or a retreat, with the entire study circle taking place in one or two days.

In addition to written material, videotapes or audiotapes can be used to spark discussion. To increase participation, some study circles break into sub-groups for at least part of the discussion.

The strength of the study circle is its flexibility. Every group's situation is unique, and study circle organizers are encouraged to adapt the basic format to the needs and goals of their own community or organization.

Organizing study circles on education

The study circle is a flexible, democratic process that you can use in many kinds of settings. The many possible scenarios for study circles on education require varying degrees of organizing:

- *Students decide to get together after school for a series of discussions. They choose facilitators from a pool of students trained in peer mediation. At the end of their discussions, they present a report to school administrators and to the school board about their ideas for the school. Or, they expand the dialogue by inviting some teachers and administrators to attend the last session of their discussions.*
- *Neighborhood parents get together to become acquainted and to discuss their concerns about their schools and their kids. In the process, they decide to set up a similar kind of discussion with teachers and school officials. They also come up with ideas about action steps they can take in their neighborhood.*
- *The school invites parents to join teachers and administrators for evening and weekend discussions about education. A local business provides refreshments. The purpose is to provide a way for teachers and parents to get to know one another, to talk about their common concerns, and to learn how to work together.*
- *The local parent-teacher organization invites parents, students, teachers, administrators, and other community members to participate in discussions about the schools. Twenty-five study circles are formed, and at the end of their sessions, some participants decide to form working groups to follow up on their ideas. Others decide to start similar discussions in their neighborhoods.*

Whether you are organizing one discussion group or a large-scale program of many study circles, you will need to consider these key questions:

- Who will sponsor the study circle(s)? Sponsors give visibility and credibility to the discussions and help recruit participants. Frequently they can provide resources such as meeting spaces and mailings of reading materials to participants. In a small-scale study circle program, a single organization may sponsor study circles among its members. Large-scale programs that bring together different parts of the community require sponsors who are committed to carrying out the various organizing tasks.
- Who will lead the group(s)? A discussion leader doesn't have to be an expert in education, but should have experience and skills in discussion leadership. You will need people who can facilitate *others'* dialogue rather than people who are anxious to offer their own opinions.
- How will you recruit participants? Methods will vary depending on the scale of your program. Whether invitations come from you or from a co-sponsoring organization, personal contact is the key to successful recruiting.
- How many times will the group(s) meet? What will they use for reading materials? This guide provides core sessions (sessions 1, 2, and 4) along with several choices for dealing with specific issues in education (sessions 3A, 3B, 3C, and 3D). You may want to select the sessions for the group(s) to discuss, or you may want discussion leader(s) and their study circle members to have the flexibility to decide.

Planning a small-scale program

You may simply bring together a small group of friends and neighbors for several evenings of discussion. Or, you may want to organize study circles within an organization to which you belong such as a parent-teacher group, the school board

or school council, a parent group, or a teacher's group. Some of the other local organizations that can host study circles on education include neighborhood associations, religious institutions, businesses, community colleges, universities, urban leagues, and the chambers of commerce.

Think about how your study circles can help support education in the community. It's a good idea to invite educators to take part in your discussions. Also, think about how you can communicate the results of your discussions to teachers and to the school board and other public officials.

Planning a large-scale program

Study circle programs that create opportunities for dialogue across the community require a strong organizing effort. To ensure broad community involvement, consider these basic steps:

- Approach educators with an attitude of partnership and cooperation. Without their support, a community-wide study circle program probably won't make much of an impact. Make it clear that the study circles aren't "gripe sessions" about the schools or opportunities to dictate to educators how they should do their jobs. Rather, the study circles are intended to be an important source of ideas and community support for the schools.

- Bring together a working group of community leaders from various organizations such as the mayor's office, the school board, school administrators and teachers, and the chamber of commerce. Ideal partnerships include sponsoring organizations with the staff, resources, and media clout to pull the program together, along with other organizations whose main resources are potential leaders and participants (for example, churches, the PTA, and neighborhood associations).

- Before expanding the program beyond the working group, solidify members' commitment by holding a study circle among this core group of people.

- Recruit potential discussion leaders. These might be members of co-sponsoring organizations, people who have been trained in mediation or conflict resolution, or graduates of local leadership development programs.

- Hold a few pilot study circles. Their success will help win support from other community leaders and the community at large.

- Hold a "kickoff" event in which the sponsoring organizations broadcast the call for dialogue to potential study circle participants. This is an ideal way to generate media coverage and greater community visibility. State clearly how and why people should participate.

- Hold a training session for the discussion leaders. The continuing education department of a nearby university, or the local community education association, may be willing to organize this facet of the program.

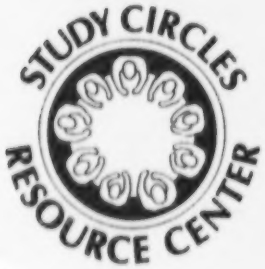
- Recruit participants from a broad cross-section of the community. This is easier, of course, if your working group is representative of the community. In particular, reach out to people who don't normally get involved in school-related activities. Also recruit teachers, administrators, and others who are involved in the schools to be part of the groups. Especially for these professionals, be sure to convey the spirit of study circles so that they know the group will not look to them for "the answers."

- Set study circle dates within a specific time period so that all of the study circles are going on around the same time.

- So that people's involvement in the study circles can result in their involvement in implementing the ideas that come out of the discussions, give careful consideration to how your groups can give feedback to the schools at the end of their discussions.

- Consider developing a simple feedback form for participants to complete in their final study circle sessions. In it, people can report their suggestions for the schools and other community organizations. This is also an ideal opportunity for participants to report how they might contribute their own time, talents, and other resources to enhance education. Such a feedback form could help establish a "community resource bank."

Remember that the Study Circles Resource Center can provide assistance and advice as you plan your program.



Leading a study circle on education

The study circle leader is the most important person in determining the group's success or failure. It is the leader's responsibility to moderate the discussion by asking questions, identifying key points, and managing the group process. While doing all this, the leader must be friendly, understanding, and supportive.

You do not need to be an expert on education in order to be a good discussion leader. However, thorough familiarity with the reading material will make you more effective and more comfortable in this important role.

You'll also need to be familiar with past events in your community such as budget battles or any other highly publicized incidents that are likely to influence the discussions. Remember that even people who have gained a reputation for being opinionated and outspoken on education should be welcome in your group so long as they agree to listen to everyone and not attempt to dominate the discussions.

If your study circle is part of a larger program, you'll need to discuss with the organizer how the sessions will be arranged. How many times will you be meeting with your group? Which of the sessions in this discussion manual will you use? How much leeway do you have for letting your group decide this?

On some of the complex issues raised in this guide, you may find that your group members will benefit from extra reading materials. Especially if they wish to delve more deeply into issues that are contentious in the community, they will need more information than is provided here. Local educators and librarians can help you find supplementary information. You might also encourage the group members themselves to find readings that explain various views on a given topic. Some study circles supplement reading material by inviting guests to make brief presentations.

Whenever group members seek out expert information, they should keep in mind that no one person or source can provide "the answers" about education. Experts can, however, provide important information for community members to use as they more fully weigh the alternatives, think about their own values, and develop their own views about what they want for their community.

Education is a serious subject, but remember to have fun! Group members will learn more when you create an atmosphere for enjoyable, respectful dialogue.

Keeping in mind the following suggestions and principles of group leadership will be useful even for experienced discussion leaders:

- **"Beginning is half," says an old Chinese proverb.** Set a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the start. Especially if the issue of education has been divisive in your community, make it clear that no one will be allowed to dominate the discussion and that all views will receive a fair hearing. In the first session, share copies of this guide's "Suggestions for participants" and ask group members to help set ground rules. This helps convey that the study circle belongs to the participants.

- **Be an active listener.** You will need to truly hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Listening carefully will set a good example for participants and will alert you to potential conflicts.

• **Stay neutral.** As the leader, you have considerable power with the group. That power should be used only for the purpose of furthering the discussion and not for establishing the correctness of a particular viewpoint. By the end of the discussion, group members should not know your views, but should have a better understanding of others' views and their own.

• **Utilize open-ended questions.** Questions such as, "What other possibilities have we not yet considered?" will encourage discussion rather than short, specific answers. Such questions are especially helpful for drawing out quiet members of the group.

• **Draw out quiet participants.** Don't put them on the spot, but rather watch for subtle opportunities to bring people into the discussion naturally. This will be easier if you use time before and after your study circle to become acquainted with each member of your group.

• **Allow for pauses and silences.** People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help someone build up the courage to make a valuable point. Leaders who tend to be impatient may find it helpful to count silently to ten after asking a question.

• **Do not allow the group to make you the expert or "answer person."** You should not play the role of final arbiter. Let the participants decide what they believe. Allow group members to correct each other when a mistake is made.

• **Let participants respond to one another's comments and questions.** Encourage interaction among the group. Participants should be conversing with each other, not with the leader. Questions or comments that are directed to the leader can often be deflected to another member of the group. Remember, you should speak less than every other person in the group.

• **Don't let the group get hung up on unprovable "facts" or assertions.** Disagreements about basic facts are common for controversial issues. If there is debate over a fact or figure, ask the group if that fact is relevant to the discussion. In some cases, it is best to leave the disagreement unresolved and move on.

• **Don't let the aggressive, talkative person or faction dominate.** If you allow people to call out and gain control of the floor, they will dominate, you may lose control, and the more polite people will become angry and frustrated. At the first sign of trouble, you can often head off problems by referring to the ground rules the group established.

• **Keep the discussions on track.** Since education is related in some way to every other issue in our society, discussions about education often move into discussions of housing, race relations, the economy, and other issues. Even though participants need the freedom to explore connections and ideas, try to keep the discussion related to the session's topic.

• **Use conflict productively and don't allow participants to personalize their disagreements.** Rather than ignoring areas of disagreement, explore them. Encourage participants to say what they really think, even if it's unpopular. However, do not tolerate put-downs, name-calling, labeling, or personal attacks.

• **Synthesize or summarize the discussion occasionally.** Consolidate related ideas in order to provide a solid base for the discussion to build upon.

• **Ask hard questions.** Don't allow the discussion to simply confirm old assumptions. Avoid following any "line," and encourage participants to re-examine their assumptions. Call attention to points of view that have not been mentioned or seriously considered, even if you don't agree with them.

• **Don't worry about achieving consensus.** While it's good for the study circle to have a sense of where participants stand, consensus is not necessary. A study circle is not a business meeting and there is no need to hammer out agreement. Even in the face of widely divergent views, you can still help participants find areas of common ground, such as concern for the future of our society and for the well-being of all children.

• **Close the session by inviting group members to mention new ideas they gained in the discussion.** This will help the group review its progress in the meeting and give a sense of closure. Before wrapping up, be sure to thank everyone for their contributions to the discussion.

Suggestions for participants

The goal of a study circle is not to learn a lot of facts, or to attain group consensus, but rather to deepen each person's understanding of the issue. This can occur in a focused discussion when people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints. The process - democratic discussion among equals - is as important as the content.

The following points are intended to help you make the most of your study circle experience and to suggest ways in which you can help the group.

• **Listen carefully to others.** Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak.

• **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or failed to consider in the past.

• **Strive to understand the positions of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do. It is important to respect people who disagree with you; they have reasons for their beliefs. You should be able to make a good case for positions you disagree with. This level of comprehension and empathy will make you a much better advocate for whatever position you take.

• **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant; if necessary, explain how they relate to the discussion. Try to make your points while they are pertinent.

• **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** If you tend to talk a lot in groups, leave room for quieter people. Be aware that some people may want to speak but are intimidated by more assertive people.

• **Address your remarks to the group rather than the leader.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

• **Communicate your needs to the leader.** The leader is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he or she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

• **Value your own experience and opinions.** Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all. Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

• **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with. You can play devil's advocate, but don't go overboard.

• **Remember that humor and a pleasant manner can go far in helping you make your points.** A belligerent attitude may prevent acceptance of your assertions. Be aware of how your body language can close you off from the group.

Schools that work: Five stories

The following five "Schools that work" supplements are real stories about real schools. They are intended to help study circle participants broaden their ideas about schools and how they can be most effective.

As with the discussion sessions, you are welcome to photocopy them for distribution to study circle participants.

Good News at Fairbanks Elementary

The "Principal's Good News Wall" at Fairbanks Elementary is filled with pictures and notes from teachers praising or thanking their students. "I'm proud of Ronald because his spelling test was perfect," one message says. "Thank you, Carey, for helping out with breakfast," another teacher writes.

This kind of enthusiasm is typical of the whole atmosphere at Fairbanks, located in Springfield, Missouri. It is all the more striking because the neighborhood the school is situated in would not seem to give much reason for optimism. About half of the students come from single-parent households, 88% of them are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and nearly half have been categorized according to their test scores as Chapter 1 students, needing remedial work on their math and verbal skills.

An elementary school in Missouri is creating a true learning environment for all students. It gives them academic challenges and rewards them for meeting those challenges.

Perhaps the surrounding environment is all the more reason for teachers and administrators at Fairbanks to give their students plenty of positive reinforcement. The approach follows the Accelerated Schools model developed at Stanford University, and it is working: almost 40% of the students have tested out of the remedial category. Surveys of teachers and students show similar gains in attitude and achievement.

The program moves decision-making power from administrators to teachers and principals. It strives to challenge students and help them feel good about themselves. Instead of putting "at-risk" students in separate remedial classes, remedial components are incorporated into the curriculum and students are encouraged to help one another. The main goals are to accelerate their learning and to get them back into the mainstream.

Fairbanks parents are involved in the day-to-day working of the school. They tutor students during and after school, serve as classroom aides, participate in evening workshops to learn how to help their children excel, and organize special events like "Dads' Donut Day."

Teachers regularly collaborate to develop new ideas. One such idea is the Fast Achievers/Student Teachers project, which assigns sixth-graders to mentor first-graders. The first-graders write want ads, asking for sixth-graders who can serve as a "puppeteer" or a "computer whiz." The older kids search the want ads and interview for positions.

Though the school is eligible for additional federal Chapter 1 funding because it has so many at-risk students, principal Joyce Creemer has decided not to apply: "The program we have works and I want to show that what we are doing can be done with normal resources."

The One-Garage Schoolhouse

Ron Helmer taught for many years in the Freeland, Michigan, public school system. He was frustrated by what he saw as the burdensome bureaucracy of the local educational system, an overemphasis on rote memorization of facts, and a curriculum that was "a mile long and an inch deep." So Helmer started his own public school - in his garage.

Some states are allowing people to set up "charter schools" as a way to provide models of reform for other public schools. This charter school in Freeland, Michigan, shows the power of active, hands-on learning.

The Northlane Math and Science Academy, which has now spilled over from Ron Helmer's garage into what used to be his living room, is a charter public school made possible by Michigan's 1993 Charter-School Act. The law allows groups of enterprising parents, teachers, and administrators to set up their own schools, giving them the average per-pupil expenditure that would have gone to educate a child in the regular schools. For instance, if a district spends $5,000 per student, a charter school in that district gets $5,000 for every child who enrolls.

The Northlane Academy has 39 students, ages 6 to 12. Helmer is officially the principal, and there are two other teachers.

Northlane's students are encouraged to be active learners. They build furniture, they collect water and plant samples from nearby ponds, they dissect walnuts, they use a computer program for urban planners called SimCity 2000. The curriculum is determined by Helmer, his teachers, and the parents, rather than by the state education department.

Free to allocate their budget as they see fit, Helmer and the others have spent it on improvements like five new Macintosh computers. Northlane's charter expires in five years. At that point, Helmer and his staff will have to show that they have made good decisions about their budget and their curriculum, and that their students have shown satisfactory progress. If the state department of education is unimpressed, the charter won't be renewed.

Charter schools can't be found across the country, at least not yet. To date, only eleven states allow them, and every new charter school law meets stiff resistance in state legislatures. However, there seem to be many successful charter schools in those states, perhaps because most charters have smaller class and school sizes, the active involvement of parents, freedom from bureaucratic rules and procedures, and an emphasis on hands-on learning. The achievements of charter schools may spread the concept to other states, and provide an opportunity for regular public schools to examine what has made the charters successful.

McAllen's 99%

McAllen, Texas would not seem to be fertile ground for parent involvement in the schools. Most of the teachers and administrators are Caucasian, and classes are taught in English; most of the parents are recent Hispanic immigrants and migrants who do not speak or write English well. For a long time the connections between schools and families were weak.

Then a group of concerned parents joined forces with Superintendent Pablo Perez and the local coordinators of a federal education program called Chapter One, and they began to make changes. Seven years later, the five coordinators of parent involvement in McAllen's district office estimate that "nearly 99% of parents have some productive contact with their children's schools."

McAllen's parents are involved in five major types of activities: conducting and participating in parent education programs, improving communications between home and school, volunteering for school projects, helping their own children at home, and serving on parent-teacher committees.

Knowledge of Spanish is now common among McAllen's educators, and at each school the parent-student handbook is provided in both English and Spanish. Families benefit from a variety of services, including evening family study centers, language programs, and parenting skills seminars.

To pay for all this, the district has solicited Federal Chapter 1 funds and reallocated some of its own money. However, it has also relied heavily on financial and other resources raised from the community. For example, each school has at least one partner organization (a business, nonprofit, club, or agency) that provides donations, volunteers, in-kind services, or equipment.

Each school is in charge of its own parent involvement activities. In one school, the parent-teacher organization created a program where parents and other volunteers are trained to run self-esteem seminars for the students. In a community with rapid population changes, it is vital that the parent organizations work constantly to involve new parents. There are official parent liaisons, and transportation to the various meetings, conferences, and events can always be arranged.

School district staff members tackle larger projects. One is a partnership with a local radio station that has produced *"Discusiones Escolares,"* a weekly program in Spanish that deals with school issues and encourages community members to get involved.

Throughout the McAllen, Texas, school district, schools and parents are joining forces. They are making a powerful impact on their students and the whole community.

Though the parents, teachers, and administrators of McAllen all express great satisfaction with the impact parent involvement has had on their students, no one is content. After all, there's still 1% to go.

A Conspiracy of Adults

Dr. James Comer can explain his philosophy of education with one anecdote: "In my childhood in East Chicago, Indiana, I can remember going every Friday with my parents to the A&P store. And there was never a time that we didn't bump into somebody from our school - a teacher or custodian, clerk or principal. There wasn't a time when there wasn't an exchange of information about how we were doing and what to do if we didn't do what we were supposed to do. As you can imagine, it's very difficult for a child to act up under those circumstances."

Getting authority figures to work together and teach young children the social skills they need has been the focus of Comer's career. He has been working with schools in New Haven, Connecticut, since 1968. In the process Comer advocates, students are not allowed to play one authority figure against another. They are guided by what he calls a "conspiracy of adults" stretching from the classroom to the home.

Young people need to be guided by adults working together to teach them the social skills they need – what James Comer calls a "conspiracy of adults" stretching from the classroom to the home.

The core of this "conspiracy" is a school management team that involves administrators, parents, teachers, and a mental health professional. This group addresses the three things that are critical to the school: the climate for learning and working together, the academic program, and staff development.

Comer's model brings parents into the school to participate in several other ways. One parent per classroom is paid a small stipend to devote a substantial amount of time as a teaching aide. There is also a large parent-teacher group that plans assemblies and co-curricular activities.

A great deal of effort goes into maintaining this level of parent involvement. One group of parents, for example, held an evening beauty salon, with free babysitting, for parents who weren't normally involved in school activities. Parents and staff try to get one adult involved for each child, often assigning an involved parent to seek out parents or grandparents, aunts and uncles, and even family friends if necessary.

Schools using the Comer model also have mental health teams, consisting of a social worker, a psychologist, a special-ed teacher, and a school counselor. The mental health teams work on a case-by-case basis to help teachers deal with children who are having difficulty.

All the adults involved in these schools give special attention to teaching social skills. Parts of the curriculum are devoted to practical skills such as writing an invitation, asking questions politely, and balancing a checkbook.

Comer's ideas are being implemented around the country. Their success in New Haven has been dramatic, not only in the schools he started working with in 1968 but in those that more recently adopted the model. These schools rank near the top in test scores and attendance. As a place for adults to discuss how to educate their children, the school has replaced the A&P.

Stray-Cat Science

In 1993, two California high school students stayed out all night, miles from home, playing with rats and cats. When they returned the next morning, were they grounded? lectured? sent to their rooms for days on end?

Actually, their parents couldn't have been prouder. These students were part of a sophisticated project studying the behavior of feral cats at the Bodega Marine Reserve. Under the supervision of their high school science teacher and a scientist from the University of California's Bodega Marine Laboratory, the students set traps for rodents so they could monitor cats' hunting patterns.

The project is part of "The Science School," an innovative program at Piner High School in Santa Rosa. The Science School offers advanced classes in science, math, technology, English, and social studies, all of them oriented toward local community problems and resources.

The Science School owes a lot to the surrounding community, and it gives a lot back. Science professionals in the area serve as mentors to the students, guiding them through year-long projects dealing with subjects like water chemistry and kinesiology. As a donation to the school, employers compensate the scientists for some of their efforts, but the mentors also donate much of their own time. The projects provide knowledge that is useful to the community, for example a study of the ecological health of Santa Rosa's urban streams.

Piner High School, which is a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools *(see resource list)*, is in the process of creating several other "learning communities" like The Science School. Eventually, all of Piner's students will be part of one of the programs. Each program will have its own "integrated curricular focus" and have the ability to make its own decisions on scheduling and resources.

The Science School is an example of the kind of school-community partnership promoted by the Coalition of Essential Schools.

The Science School demands a lot of its students. Mastering the advanced knowledge required for the projects is difficult enough. Students must also learn to work with teams of adults, do a great deal of routine and physically demanding basic science, and be thorough and responsible enough to be part of a professional research project. But through the projects students can earn college credit at the University of California. Sometimes they can even see their names in print. "I hope some day [the project report] will be publishable," one student researcher wrote, "and believe me, I am going to try my hardest."

Resources for further discussion and action

The organizations and resources listed here do not cover specific topics within education, but rather are general in scope. Many of them are geared to community involvement in improving education.

Organizations

Access ERIC
Educational Resources Information Center
1600 Research Boulevard
Rockville, MD 20850-3172
(800) LET-ERIC; fax (301) 251-5767

The main information source provided by the U.S. Department of Education. Consists of sixteen clearinghouses, each focused on a particular aspect of education. Offers publications and lists of publications. Internet address: <acceric@inet.edu.gov>.

Activism 2000 Project
PO Box E
Kensington, MD 20895
(301) 929-8808; fax (301) 929-8907

A resource center created to encourage young people to take action on a variety of issues. Offers information, training, and materials.

Center on Families, Communities, Schools & Children's Learning
3505 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218
(410) 516-8800

Offers a variety of resources on parent involvement and school-family partnerships.

Coalition of Essential Schools
Brown University, Box 1969
Providence, RI 02912
(401) 863-3384

A high school-university partnership working to redesign the American high school for better student learning and achievement. Includes over 180 member schools working to implement nine "Common Principles."

Education Commission of the States
707 Seventeenth St., Suite 2700
Denver, CO 80202-3427
(303) 299-3600; fax (303) 296-8332

An organization that helps state leaders develop and carry out policies that promote improved performance of the education system. Offers national forums, technical assistance, an information clearinghouse, and publications.

Educators for Social Responsibility
23 Garden Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
(617) 492-1764; fax (617) 864-5164

An organization devoted to developing new approaches to education to meet the demands for the nuclear age. Offers publications, workshops, and consultation. Its **Resolving Conflict Creatively Program** assists school systems in dealing with violence.

Institute for Educational Leadership
1001 Connecticut Ave. NW, Suite 310
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 822-8405; fax (202) 872-4050

An organization that seeks to improve educational opportunities and results for children and youth by developing and supporting leaders who work together. Provides publications, professional development opportunities, and consultation.

Institute for Responsive Education
605 Commonwealth Avenue
Boston, MA 02215
(617) 353-3309; fax (617) 353-8444

Promotes educational restructuring through the development of family-school-community partnerships. Provides publications and sponsors the **League of Schools Reaching Out**, a network of 90 schools.

National Association of Partners in Education
209 Madison Street, Suite 401
Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 836-4880; fax (703) 836-6941

Promotes the formation and growth of effective partnerships that ensure the success of all students. Offers training, publications, and networking services.

National Committee for Citizens in Education
900 2nd St. NE, Suite 8
Washington, DC 20002
(800) NET-WORK; fax (202) 408-0452

Promotes citizen and parent participation in all educational issues. Facilitates local school improvement plans and disseminates information.

National Community Education Association
3929 Old Lee Highway, Suite 91A
Fairfax, VA 22030-2401
(703) 359-8973; fax (703) 359-0972

Advances community involvement in K-12 education, community self-help, and lifelong learning. Provides members with publications and a variety of services.

Parents for Public Schools
PO Box 12807
Jackson, MS 39236-2807
(800) 880-1222; fax (601) 982-0002

An organization dedicated to supporting and strengthening public schools through community-wide support. PPS chapters involve parents and other citizens in improving education in their school districts. Call for information on how to form a chapter.

Study Circles Resource Center
PO Box 203, 697A Pomfret Street
Pomfret, CT 06258
(203) 928-2616; fax (203) 928-3713

In conjunction with this guide, SCRC staff can provide assistance - additional resources, free consulting, networking - to a wide range of institutions working to develop small-group discussion programs. SCRC's free quarterly newsletter, ***Focus on Study Circles*** provides on-going information on resources and model programs.

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Peter Aladjem, educator, gender equity and bilingual education programs

Marya Axner, multicultural consultant, and Coordinator, Community Leadership Project of the Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

Ben Birdsell, President, Association for Effective Schools

Sally Campbell, Associate Director, Maine Council of Churches

Brenda Cipriano, Director, Volunteer Center Development, Points of Light Foundation

Doris Coster, retired university administrator, Pomfret, CT

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Barbara Davis, Chapter Services Coordinator, Parents for Public Schools

Don and Georganna Dickson, Pomfret Center, CT

Debi Duke, Coordinator, National Coalition of Education Activists

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Kathleen Hurty, Director of Ecumenical Networks, National Council of Churches

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Tom Richards, Director of Community Education, Independent School District of Boise, ID

Perry Robinson, Deputy Director, Colleges and Universities Department, American Federation of Teachers

Daniel Safran, Director, Center for the Study of Parent Involvement

Harris Sokoloff, Executive Director, Center for School Study Councils

Karen Stokes, Executive Director, Coalition for Low-Income Community Development

Tony Wagner, President, Institute for Responsive Education

Robert Zeller, Coordinator, American School Reform Town Meetings